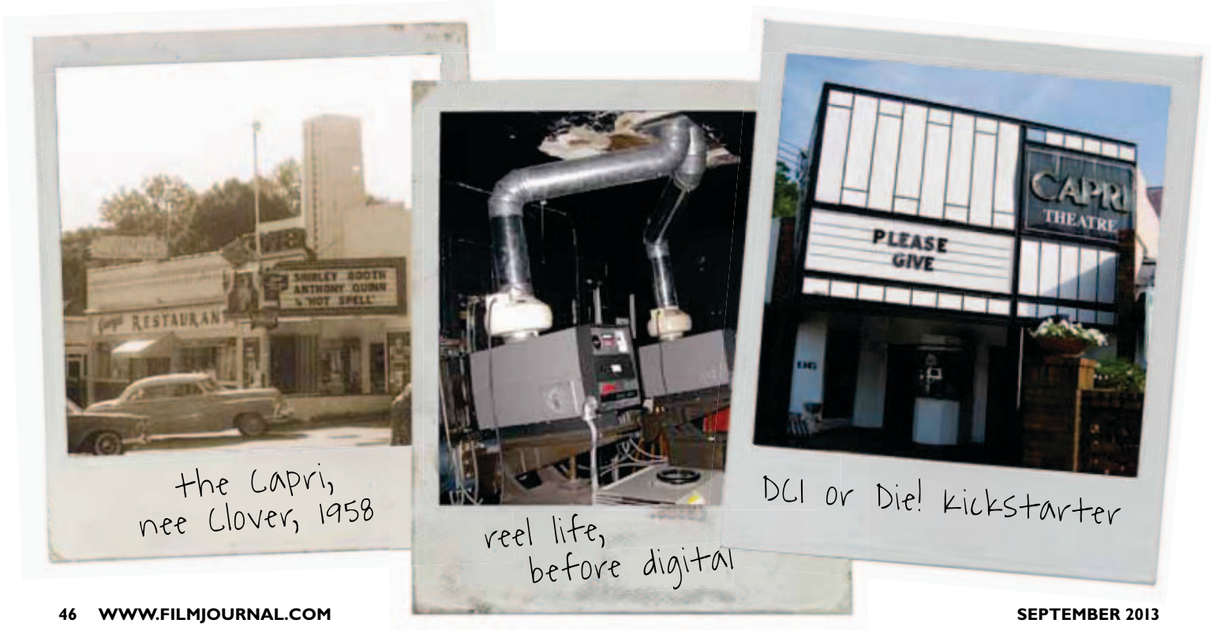
CLASSIC MOVIE HOUSES GO DIGITAL

BY ANDREAS FUCHS

DCI or DIE

"The time has come. The Capri Theatre needs to get digital." Continuously operating since 1941—when the first neighborhood theatre in Montgomery, Alabama, was still known as The Clover—the Capri Community Film Society, its nonprofit operator since 1983, was faced with the daunting task to go "DCI or DIE." (We gratefully—and with permission—lifted those catchy words for our headline.) Noting "the studios made us do it," cinema director Martin McCaffery launched a Kickstarter campaign in April, ultimately raising more than the $80,000 requested, in addition to "a generous grant" from The Daniel Foundation of Birmingham that provided the first $25,000. DCI it is.

While certainly lucky to have such good friends, the Capri (www.capritheatre.org) is not alone in overcoming the challenges of digital conversion and in hoping for good things to come with it. Putting it into perspective, that amount of money is "more than we spent on 35mm in 30 years," McCaffery says in his video pitch. "And it is also more than we had in ticket sales last year." Other successful Kickstarters such as the Catlow (http://bit.ly/fji012catlow), Patio, Harbor and Rose theatres as well as Lyric Cinema Café (http://bit.ly/fji112kickstarter) have already been profiled in these pages. And McCaffery credits the Crescent Theatre in Mobile, Ala. as his inspiration, along with the discussions at the Sundance



Arthouse Convergence last January. "After that, I just decided we had nothing to lose, so why not give it a try?"

How are independents dealing with this seismic change? In the first of a two-part series, we examine the work of passionate individuals and groups of people not only at the Capri but in Tampa, Florida (www.tampatheatre.org), and Berkeley Springs, West Virginia (www.starwv.com). They will be joined next month by equally good folks from Stamford, Connecticut (www.avontheatre.org), as well as theatres in Santa Monica and Hollywood, Calif. (www.americancinematheque.com), and Lichtervelde, Belgium (www.cinemadekeizer.be). All of them exclusively share with *Film Journal International* their thoughts on timing, how they financed the conversion, specific challenges they encountered due to their unique surroundings—and, of course, how programming philosophies are being impacted. As McCaffery says, "We're hoping digital will allow us to expand our programming."

DIGITAL CINEMA

Says CEO John Bell on the fundraising campaign for digital conversion of the nonprofit Tampa Theatre, "We elected to go with a more grassroots campaign. Most people gave us $10 or $50 gifts, but we raised about $104,000."

All of our exemplary movie houses have been around for a long, long time. At 72 years, the Capri is the youngest in the bunch (barely, by one year). The Aero Theatre opened in 1940 and is operated by the American Cinematheque, which also runs the Egyptian in Hollywood. Exhibitor-showman Sid Grauman launched the exotic landmark in 1922, four years after the Million Dollar Theatre in downtown Los Angeles and five years before his world-famous Chinese Theatre down the boulevard. The Avon was part of that magical movie year 1939 and our small-town wonders in Berkeley Springs and Lichtervelde were established in 1928 and 1924, respectively.

"I have to remind people that the Tampa Theatre was built before sound was even invented," laughs John Bell, the president and CEO of the 1926 atmospheric movie palace that the MPAA recently placed on its list of "the world's best" (www.thecredits.org/2013/05/ten-of-the-worlds-best-movie-theaters). "Since film is our core business, we were well aware for several years that digital cinema was coming," he reassures. "In July 2012, however, we realized it wasn't just coming but that it was here. While there wasn't any one distributor that went on record saying they would stop distributing film prints to the Tampa Theatre in 2013, that was the message we were hearing nonetheless. Part of why we had been waiting was our hope that the digital conversion would be like plasma TVs," he laughs. "You know, prices coming way, way down after the first ones had come out. Unfortunately that has not been the case."

The accelerated timing put the nonprofit Tampa Theatre

in what Bell calls an odd position. "We were already planning for major upgrades to the building, electrical and HVAC work, seating… Digital cinema was always a part of that larger, multi-million-dollar package that requires finding substantial donors to become successful. We realized we had to move up the timetable on digital and that we needed to bring it out of the main campaign." Instead of asking major donor prospects for less money than they might actually be willing and able to gift in order to secure the Tampa's future overall, "for digital we elected to go with a more grassroots campaign," he says. "Most people gave us $10 or $50 gifts, but we raised about $104,000 that way and were able to approach a friendly local bank for a bridge loan on the rest because we had to go digital now." Bell is convinced that "without the great support that the Tampa received from the community, we would not have been able to get bank financing."

What about virtual-print-fee support? Every theatre in this survey responded that to take that option was not an option for them at all. "I know VPFs make a lot of sense for some folks," Bell reasons, "but in our business model, such a deal has the unintended consequence that you lose a bit of control, right? We prefer more of an in-house curatorial approach in how we select and book our films. It was important for us to maintain that flexibility and control."

As part of the technology selection process, the Tampa team sent out requests for proposals. "We started getting bids at the same time as we were raising money constantly," he elaborates about using the website, e-mail blasts and dedicated mailings to members of the Tampa Theatre. Because of "specific site challenges due to the historical structure [including] a pretty steep angle from the booth to our screen and acoustic issues"—additional upgrades were to be done as part of the $150,000 project overall.

The Capri as well has bigger plans, and cinema director McCaffery would also have preferred to put digital off until "we restore and rehabilitate the building," he admits. "We knew the day of digital was coming, but we were stalling as long as we could. Frankly, I thought the studios would end their 35mm distribution by the end of 2013, but that the indie distribs would hold on to film prints as long as possible. In retrospect, that didn't make sense. The indies were the first to start losing 35mm because they had to have DCPs for their films that played in big-city multiplexes. They don't have the money to carry dual inventory, so more and more of their films were digital only. As I was missing out on several films, I knew we would have to add digital sooner than I hoped."

At press time, the Capri anticipates its digital debut for the fall, for which Boston Light & Sound (www.blsi.com), who also worked wonders on the Tampa Theatre, will install a Christie projector. "We are now working on all of the coordination that will be needed, such as construction, electricity, HVAC, curtains," McCaffery explains. "The projection booth is barely big enough for our 35mm projectors, so figuring out where to

The Day Our Star Went Digital

by Jeanne Mozier
Owner and Popcorn Empress,
Star Theatre

It was a shock when we received the first letter. Twentieth Century Fox announced they would offer no more movies on 35mm film by the end of 2013. My husband, Jack Soronen, and I had to make a decision—a very expensive decision.

The Star Theatre is a nearly 100-year-old movie house that is the main nightlife in the small historic spa town of Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. It is both the shining light of weekend nights with its 1949 marquee, and an important economic factor in a town where tourism is a major industry. We had to go digital or close. We knew we couldn't abandon our town to no movies and an economic hole, so we made the only decision possible.

The Star is a true mom-and-pop operation. Jack and I are the sole employees along with various volunteers and family who fill in occasional gaps. It's our year-round weekend job. Jack takes tickets, runs the projectors and keeps everything functioning. I book movies and make the best popcorn in four states. We both sweep, mop and vacuum. We've owned and operated the Star since 1977 and are only the third owners since movies were first shown there in 1928.

The abstract decision was easy to make: Digital or die. It was the high cost of the equipment that gave us pause. We calculated it would cost virtually every dime in profit we'd made since we opened, and about twice what we paid for the business and building originally. The movie industry offered no financial assistance and we interpreted the VPF systems as something akin to serfdom. The Star is our private business, so we did not think public fundraising was appropriate. In the end, we figured we were committing to work until we were 90 to earn it all back.

Jack set off in May 2012 to the Mid-Atlantic NATO conference in northern Virginia to see what he could learn about the digital world. Arriving early, he met up with the folks from Ballantyne-Strong in Omaha, Nebraska. It was love at first sight and they provided us with the newest used system we've ever seen: an NEC NC2000C projector using a GDC SX-2001A server.

Once we decided to go digital, we made other upgrades as well. Jack wanted to be sure that people would see changes beyond what a digital image brings to the screen. We bought an MDI screen and the Star got a new coat of paint inside and out. There was no way around it. We would have to raise prices.

Even with new, higher prices, the Star remains a bargain. Adult tickets increased from $3.75 to $4.50. Not one person has ever mentioned the higher ticket price. The only reaction comes from our city friends who laugh and claim that we're now approaching 1995 level.

Going digital was a challenging learning experience for Jack, who has been the projectionist since we opened. Originally he used the two carbon-rod Brenkert projectors installed by the Alpine chain which leased the theatre in 1949. In 2002, when the last American manufacturer of the carbon rods stopped production, we decided to upgrade to a xenon bulb and platter system. It was a major quality-of-life improvement for Jack. No more *Cinema Paradiso.* But also, no more sweating in the projection booth through the whole movie waiting to switch from one projector to another, every 20 minutes or so, to replace the rods which burned to provide the light.

Jack gathered a posse of four friends to help empty the existing projection booth of the 2002 system and move in the new equipment. He contracted with our technical advisers and suppliers at Cardinal Sound in Elkridge, Maryland. A pair of Cardinal technicians came to Berkeley Springs and spent several hours hooking up the digital equipment, setting image and sound. Jack was on the phone with them all the next day as they worked to adjust software. Then came the digital opening night and we held our collective breaths as Jack flipped the switch on the server.

Our first digital movie was *Twilight, Breaking Dawn Part 2.* We figured that audience would be forgiving should there be a crisis. There was none until the following weekend with *Lincoln.* We had booked the movie for an additional day to accommodate a group of seniors who wanted a daytime showing. Unfortunately, the digital key was set to expire Sunday night and we did not know enough to recognize that. There we were with a hundred-plus old folks patiently waiting nearly an hour for this newfangled technology to work. While Jack spent the time frantically on the phone with Deluxe and Cardinal techs, I did the obvious: I went on stage and blamed it all on Disney.

With our calendar system where a single movie shows for a weekend, we have not noticed any big change in how quickly we can show a particular title. One improvement for us is that trailers are now easily available in bulk. The digital system is another step up in easing the job of the projectionist. No more hauling heavy reels of films up and down narrow steps, splicing and breaking down reels for the platters. No more breathing xenon fumes. Once mastered, the loading and showing of movies is much easier, which makes it possible to train back-up projectionists.

The Star Theatre and Jack Soronen

We're excited about the possibilities of digital. The acoustics of the Star's 325-seat auditorium are exceptional and have delighted performing musicians and those who used it as a recording studio. Someday we hope to be streaming live opera from Lincoln Center—or maybe World Wide Wrestling.

For our audiences, it is the crisp image and almost 3D quality even on our 2D system that impresses them the most. Local patron Ken Troy says, "The image is great and the prices are still the best around. But the most important part is they didn't change the popcorn machine."

Located in a brick building on a main corner in town, the Star Theatre is on the West Virginia Historic Theater Trail. Check www.starwv.com or call 304-258-1404 for what's playing.

put the digital equipment was a challenge. The new projector will go in the empty space under the current booth and that will require blowing a hole in the wall."

On a positive note, that means the beloved classic hardware can remain in place. "Our current projectors are Simplex XLs, which we bought used in 1994," he further notes. "They are probably from the 1960s. We have a 16mm Hortson that we bought used from a DC porno theatre in 1986, likely from the late 1970s. The Capri's 1941 wiring is the other challenge. Being in the South, heat and humidity is always a problem, especially in a building that doesn't have efficient HVAC. We will have a separate AC for the digital projector. We will also be installing new curtains and masking, as well as some additions to the sound system. Our sound processor is a Dolby CP650 bought new in 2002."

At the Tampa Theatre, some $30,000 of the budget was devoted to improving sound, John Bell estimates. Prior to installing the upgraded and "very well-designed" screen speaker arrays with narrow dispersion angles that were "literally aligned with laser beams," there were problems, he notes. "The muddiness of the olden days, especially in the speech intelligibility spectrum, was caused by the sound from behind the screen bouncing off this very ornate 1926 plaster work. Now the sound is completely focused on the seats and nothing directed at any of the walls." On those very beautiful walls, "the 24 surround speakers that we already had from a 5.1 upgrade ten years prior were sufficient enough" to remain in place "after BL&S tuned them up, with a lot of queuing and balancing." (By the way, the Tampa's three-manual, 14-rank Mighty Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ doesn't need any of that.)

"The new Datasat processor is great," Bell says, praising its manifold options of auxiliary input. "That capability is important to us, because we have a custom input panel to accommodate all kinds of different formats that our guests bring in when we host film festivals here." On the visual side as well, "you plug in what you have. We select an input and, boom, it magically shoots through the d-cinema projector and goes up to the screen. All the while being scaled up so that it looks the best it can possibly look."

"For us, it was never an either/or decision, but about adding d-cinema technology rather than converting," Bell continues. "We have the space to keep our two 35mm projectors—and the platters we used for first-run product—in place for showing archival prints in the future." Where then did the Christie CP-2220 projector and Doremi servers go? "I wouldn't say the Tampa Theatre was designed for digital projection," he chuckles, "but fortunately, we have three projector ports with one sitting right in the middle that was not in use." The 24-degree angle—with a 105-foot throw to a 24-foot-wide screen that fills the entire proscenium—was not quite as convenient. "There is not a digital-cinema projector on this planet that can function properly—and remain within warranty terms—at an angle greater than 20 degrees. After some head-scratching, the design team figured out to go with a series of optical mirrors bouncing the image up and out in a periscopic system. It's quite ingenious, actually, and works quite beautifully." To optimize the picture quality, the mirror array system had to be prevented from vibrating, so as not to cause jittery images on the screen. BL&S fabricated a projector frame, which was affixed tightly to the projector.

The alternative to those mirrors would have been to construct an unwanted new booth in the mezzanine of the historic auditorium. "That was not going to happen. Finding an engineering solution was a great sigh of relief for us," Bell says, giving due credit. "Our stage manager and projectionist worked it all out with Boston Light & Sound. I can't sing their praises enough. They offered the most detailed design itineration and planning. They weren't the highest and they weren't the lowest bid, but I knew we were going to end up with a really good system. The installation went just great. And the quality of the image is so crisp and pure… Frankly, all we've gotten since debuting digital are rave reviews about the beautiful picture and the awesome sound."

Maybe it is because Martin McCaffery hasn't had his digital systems installed yet at the Capri, but his perspective is a little more astringent: "I am hoping for a revelation that digital causes some horrible disease, but your audience probably isn't interested," he jokes. In turn, John Bell admits to being "one of the film purists, honestly, that lamented the demise of 35mm… but I have become a convert. I think it sucks that it costs so much for theatres having to install all the equipment that… primarily benefits the distributors. But, at the Tampa Theatre, it has also brought a huge increase in the quality of the experience for our audience." To him, it all "still comes down to what you put up on the screen, the stories that filmmakers tell us. Going digital is also about choices, so that we could program what we wanted to show without being blocked from new opportunities simply because of a technology we didn't have. At the end of the day, technology is the means. Going to the movie theatre is still about the films we show and how good they are. It's all about the experience for the audience."

For more about film versus digital choices and experiences of movie houses and their audiences, check in again next month. ✤